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ABSTRACT

The necessities of promoting wider social understanding among children and of helping them to develop self-insight and respect through careful, sensitive book selection are implicit in the aims set forth in a 1964 NCTE publication, "Children's Literature--Old and New." However, these aims seem ignored in "Adventuring with Books," a 1966 NCTE booklist for elementary schools, in which only 12 of the 1250 titles concerned the Negro. The sections on the picture-story book, books for beginners, fiction, biography, and social studies recommended the 12 titles, while sections on American history, folk and fairy tales, poetry, and sports contained no titles involving the Negro. Unless the black child can identify with the child in the book or with his cultural heritage, he is denied help in achieving self-insight and the chance to move easily into the main stream of American life. (JMC)

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# BOOKS TO ENCOMPASS AN EXPANDING SOCIETY

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I had a dream, a dream that occurred over and over during my childhood, a dream that even now haunts me in my waking moments. Unlike the dream of the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it is a dream that the Freudians would take delight in interpreting – examining my neurosis, prodding my psyche in an attempt to explain the nightmare which set me writhing in my sleep, twisting and turning in a vain effort to awaken, crying out in terror until someone in the family soothed me and quieted my fears. Even now it makes me tremble inwardly to think of the horrors of that dreadful nightmare which I hope has disappeared forever into that dark limbo of forgotten and unwanted dreams.

What was this terrible dream that turned my nights into a living hell? Over and over I have lain in a semiconscious state, aware that I was having a nightmare, but unable to awaken as I saw myself lying like one dead while those around me prepared to bury me. Suddenly I was in a dark hole with dirt being shoveled over me. I was being buried alive! Vainly I tried to call out, "Wait, I'm not dead, I'm alive. Look at me, look at me. See, I can breathe, I can hear, I can see!" But in the dream, my eyes remained closed, and although I struggled to call out, no sound came, and the hole was being filled over my head, steadily, relentlessly, while in my silent tomb I could make no one hear me. Although they had looked at me – those strange people surrounding me – no one really saw me. I was only a body to be put out of the way, covered up and left alone to rot away through eternity. And just when the dream seemed unbearable, I would be awakened by some member of my beloved family. My cheeks would be wet with tears, and I would be soothed and comforted until once more I could face the darkness and, knowing someone was near to protect me, could safely turn over and sleep soundly the rest of the night.

Today my nightmare has vanished and the psychiatric implications are of no importance to me. But lately as I have thought of the plight of my soul brothers, I feel again the terror of the small child being buried alive, unseen, unheard. The invisible man – that is how Ralph Ellison describes him in his brilliant novel. This oppressive terror is what the black child has felt in an alien society where he has for generations tried to cry out, "Don't bury

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me, look at me, listen to me, I am alive!" But those around him have looked without seeing, listened without hearing, and gone relentlessly on burying him alive in his dark ghetto tomb. Is it any wonder then that he has welcomed the not too gentle awakening by the H. Rap Browns, the Stokley Carmichaels, the Eldridge Cleavers? They at least have heard him, and even more important, they have shown him the way to make the world sit up and listen to what he has to say. At long last he is being seen and heard! No longer is he the invisible man. Despised? Perhaps so. But invisible? Never again!

Now that the awakening has come with such violence, the world shudders and America wonders, What can we do to stem this flow? How can we meet the demands "they" place upon us to be included in this "Great Society"? Who are these dead who have dared to come to life and disturb our peace and quiet, rock our stable world, project themselves into our established way of life?

Yes, America, like Lazarus rising from the dead, the faceless invisible black masses have come forth from their graves. The militant blacks, the discontented flower children, the protesting students are all stepping forth to remind us that society must change. The world is changing, and either we meet the challenge or be strangled by our own cherished, staid ways. This is not to say that values must go. No, like the valuable diamonds the older generations wore so proudly in their Tiffany settings, they must be put in a new and more modern setting. Like the jeweler, we, "the experts," must guard against the ideals we cherish so dearly being cheapened by their new settings. We must be sure that imitations are not substituted for the true gems.

I challenge you today as members of PCTE and the National Council of Teachers of English to re-examine yourselves, to look at your aims and purposes, to re-examine the list you so proudly proclaim as a "guide to book buying" and see if it has relevance in today's world. Does it truly "help the child to find himself"? "develop among the children wider social understanding"? "give each child self insight"?

I say it does not if I must speak for the black child, but in so doing I also identify with all the other minority groups who cry out to be seen and heard in America today.

In preparing to come here today, I read a pamphlet published in 1964 by NCTE, *Children's Literature—Old and New* (edited by Virginia M. Reid). The purposes are lofty:

> To take a fresh look at children and literature, to reconsider the issues, to reappraise, and to report a variety of ways to acculturate children and youth in understanding their literary heritage.

I heartily endorse these purposes; they are sound and good. But then I examined NCTE's *Adventuring with Books*, a booklist for elementary schools. It was published in 1966, two years after the statement of those noble purposes. I could hardly believe what I saw! Remember, this list was copyrighted in 1966: three years after the historic march on Washington, one year after Watts, at the moment when the cry for freedom and recognition was raging among the 22 million black people of the country. Yet, of 1250 titles on your buying guide, how many were on the Negro? Thirteen titles, and one of these was given twice. NCTE does, of course, have a wonderful list of Negro books compiled by a real expert, Charlie Mae Rollins, but there again is separatism. *We Build Together*, excellent as it is, is seen by only a few experts in the field. But here is your general buying guide, found in bookstores and newstands, and used faithfully by rural America and by parents because they have faith in you and want to be led to the best books for their children. And in all that list of 1250 titles, only 13 on the Negro! I decided to check the list by subjects and would like to share some of the results with you and at the same time to offer some titles for your consideration.

First the "Picture-Story Book" section. There are fifteen pages of titles in this group, but only one book deals with a black child — and that one a child in Haiti. The book is *Josefina February*, and I have no quarrel with its inclusion, but not to mention *Snowy Day*, a Caldecott medal winner by Ezra Keats, really hurts me. In fairness, I must admit I found that author-artist's *Whistle for Peter* tucked away with the "Books for Beginners," but let's add *Peter's Chair*, and that beautiful, sensitive *Sam* by Ann H. Scott, the story of a small boy who experiences loneliness when everyone around him is busy. For this section I also suggest *What Mary Jo Shared*, the story of a shy child who finds something special to share with her classmates. No doubt you have your favorites among the many new books now flooding the market, but your values must continue to be the criteria for selection; do not fall guilty of a sin of omission by failing to help minority groups to move into the mainstream of society.

In the nineteen pages of "Books for the Beginners," I found only three titles, one of them the *Whistle for Peter* just mentioned. The others are *The Case of the Hungry Stranger* by Crosby Bon-

sall and *New Boy in School* by May Justus. Any of Bonsall's books could be added, but I would suggest these additional works: Jerrold Beim's *Two Is a Team,* which was among the first books to promote racial understanding, and Blossom Randall's *Fun for Chris,* which is important for its well-handled attempt to explain the difference in skin color to Chris and his Negro friend Toby. Elizabeth Hill's *Evan's Corner* is a wonderful book for the city child living in crowded conditions; it is the story of a little boy who wants a place of his own so he will not be pestered by his little brother, but when he gets such a place (a corner of the room with a blanket to make it private), he realizes something is missing – the companionship of his little brother. *Benjie* by Joan Lexau is another book to promote sympathy and understanding among children. All of these books are in some way related to the child's own personal interests and stages of development.

In the nine pages of "Fiction" titles there are four Negro titles included, and one of those (*New Boy in School*) is also listed in the preceding section. I will mention only a few of the many good books that might have been listed. I agree whole heartedly with your pamphlet that

> The school aims to give each child self-insight . . . When many story situations have reached his inner being so that he identifies with these characters and with the problems they face, he frequently gains through comparison or contrast new understandings about himself and his environment. Thus he can be helped to a more realistic appraisal of his own personality and, as a result, to new aspirations for himself.

I feel that unless the black child can identify completely with the child in the book he is denied this self-insight. By the same token, the life of the child in the book and the problem he faces must be akin to his own or it fails to reach his "inner being." Therefore, such books as Bonham's *Durango Street* is of great value to the ghetto child being faced with the problem of joining a gang for survival. Weik's *Jazz Man* handles very tastefully a problem many of today's children face when they are deserted by one or both parents. The poor child with barely enough to live on, but with a parent who refuses to get on the Welfare can understand fully the problems of little Becky, who would be happy to have a special treat for her birthday in *Striped Ice Cream.* And the child who faces camp life for the first time with dread or with great expecta-

tions can sympathize with the two little girls in *Wonderful, Terrible Time* by Stolz. It puzzles me how you could ever have omitted the wonderful story of *Bright April* by Marguerite DeAngeli, and the child shunted from one school to the other sees himself in *Roosevelt Grady* or *Dead End School.* Among other favorites let us not forget *The Empty Schoolhouse* (Carlson); *Jennifer, Hecate, MacBeth, William McKinley and Me, Elizabeth* (Konigsburg); *A Cap for Mary Ellis* (Newell); *Egypt Game* (Snyder.)

The "American History" section contains seven pages of titles, but not one on the Negro! And this, my friends, is exactly "what it's all about"! You say in your pamphlet:

> Books with an authentic historic or regional setting help a child appreciate the gifts of past generations and of other peoples to his way of life.

If this is true of children in the majority groups, how much more must these books be needed by children in minority groups. Children who are never thought of as descendants of heroes, whose role in the building of this country is not known, who have been considered drags on society and have been taunted with "Go back to Africa" even in this enlightened day! Where, then, on your list is such a book as Merritt P. Allen's *Battle Lanterns?* Here is a book which focuses on the role of the Negro during the Revolutionary War. What about *Corrie and the Yankee* by M. C. Levy, the story of the ten year old Negro girl who becomes a heroine when she hides a Yankee soldier. In fiction or in biography where can you find a more exciting heroine than Harriet Tubman, and yet Swift's *Railroad to Freedom* is missing. *By Secret Railway* (Meadowcroft) is an exciting account of the underground railroad and the involvement of two friends, one black, the other white. A new book that should be considered for the list is *Sophia Scrooby, Preserved* by Martha Bacon. This is a very well told story of Sophia, who was brought to America as a slave when only six years old and who remained undaunted and resourceful in the face of adversity. And last but by no means least, *Canalboat to Freedom,* which tells of an outstanding friendship between the emigrant boy and a former slave.

I shall pass quickly over the "Folk and Fairy Tales" section with only a quick plea for inclusion of one of Augusta Baker's wonderful collections of African folk tales or Courlander's *Cowtail Switch.* For a colorful, easy to read folk tale you would have to search long and hard to find one that excels *John Henry* by Ezra Keats.

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing,
To make a poet black and bid him sing.

In the six pages of titles under "Verse," there is not a single black poet represented. I enter my plea for one of Langston Hughes' collections or anthologies – *Dreamkeeper* perhaps? Then there is Gwendolyn Brooks' *Bronzeville for Boys and Girls.* An attractive anthology for younger children is *City Rhythms* by Anne Grifalconi.

The "Sports" section runs from page 131 to 135. It contains no title on Negro athletes. Can this be true? A section on sports and not one book on a black sports figure in 1966? And who is Mr. Baseball? At least, let us include Shapiro's *The Willie Mays Story.*

The "Biography" section covers page 148 to 161, but among all those titles, only four deal with the black man. And who are they? Matthew Henson in *To the Top of the World* by Pauline Angell, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Ralph Bunche! No books on Martin Luther King, Jr. – that is equal to heresy! Harriet Tubman, the most colorful character of them all? Is it excitement you want? Then try Dorothy Sterling's *Captain of the Planter* or Petry's *Tituba of Salem Village,* and everyone who sees it is most impressed with the Adams book *Great Negroes Past and Present.*

And finally, do you mean to tell me that in all this great struggle for Civil Rights there is no place in your "Social Studies" section for more than one book on the Negro (Dorothy Sterling, *Forever Free*)? Shades of democracy! Let us at least include Arna Bontemps, *Story of the Negro,* a runner up for the Newberry Medal, and Harris, *The Long Freedom Road: the Civil Rights Story.* I am sure you sincerely believe your statement that "the school aims to give each child knowledge and appreciation of his cultural heritage."

I agree with your committee once more that "understanding of the self and development of the self-concept in relation to others [must be] the major goals of education for today's children." We must abolish the invisible people. We must recognize that society must expand to include all people – the rich, the poor, the great and the unknown, the black and the white. Governments must do it through legislation, social workers must do it through programs, and educators must do it through books. And by so doing, although the world grows smaller, we will have grown larger as a nation, but what is more important, we will have helped each child to find himself as a unique personality and to lose himself in those broader interests which encompass other peoples, places, and times.